

PHALLIC WORSHIP

BY HODDER M. WESTROPP

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HUMAN NATURE is the same in all climes; and the workings of this same human nature are almost identical in the different stages of its growth. Hence similar and analogous ideas, beliefs, and superstitious practices are frequently evolved independently among different peoples. These are the result of suggestions arising spontaneously in the human mind at certain stages of its development, and which seem almost universal.

As a remarkable instance of this, I have drawn up the following sketch of phallic worship, which was one of those beliefs or superstitious practices which have sprung up independently, and which seem to have extensively prevailed among many nations.

It will acquire additional interest when it is considered that it is the most ancient of the superstitions of the human race, that it has prevailed more or less among all known people in ancient times, and that it has been handed down even to a very late and Christian period.

In the earlier ages the operations of nature made a stronger impression on the minds of men. Those ideas, springing from the constant observation of the modes of acting in nature, were consequently more readily suggested to the minds of all races of men in the primitive ages.

Two causes must have forcibly struck the minds of men in those early periods when observant of the operations of nature, one the generative power, and the other the productive, the active and passive causes. This double mode of production visible in nature must have given rise to comparisons with the mode of proceeding in the generation of animals, in which two causes concur, the one active and the other passive, the one male and the other female, the one as father, the other as mother. These ideas were doubtless suggested independently and spontaneously in different countries; for the human mind is so constituted that the same objects and the same operations of nature will suggest like ideas in the minds of men of all races, however widely apart.

Nature to the early man was not brute matter, but a being invested with his own personality, and endowed with the same feelings, passions, and performing the same actions. He could only conceive the course of nature from the analogy to his own actions. Generation, begetting—production, bringing forth—were thus his ideas of cause and effect. The earth was looked upon as the mould of nature, as the recipient of seeds, the nurse of what was produced in its bosom; the sky was the fecundating and fertilizing power. An analogy was suggested in the union of the male and female. These comparisons are found in ancient writers. "The sky," Plutarch says, "appeared to men to perform the functions of a father, as the earth those of a mother. The sky was the father, for it cast seed into the bosom of the earth, which in receiving them became fruitful and brought forth, and was the mother."

This union has been sung in the following verses by Virgil:

“Tum pater omnipotens fecundis imbribus aether
Conjugis in gremium laetae descendit.”—Geor. ii.

Columella has related, in his treatise on agriculture, the loves of nature, or the marriage of heaven and earth, which takes place in the spring of the year.

These ideas bear a prominent part in the religious creeds of several nations. In Egypt the Deity or principle of generation was Khem, called “the father”—the abstract idea of father; as the goddess Maut was that of mother. The office of Khem was not confined to the procreation and continuation of the human species, but extended even to the vegetable world, over which he presided, when we find his statue accompanied by trees and plants; and kings offering to him herbs of the ground, cutting the corn before him, or employed in his presence tilling the land, and preparing it to receive the generating influence of the deity.

In the Saiva Purana of the Hindoos, Siva says: “From the supreme spirit proceed Purusha (the generative or male principle), Prakriti (the productive or female principle), and Tirue; and by them was produced this universe, the manifestation of the one god. . . . Of all organs of sense and intellect, the best is mind, which proceeds from Ahankara, Ahankara from intellect, intellect from the supreme being, who is, in fact, Purusha. It is the primeval male, whose form constitutes the universe, and whose breath is the sky; and though incorporeal, that male am I.” In the Kritya Tatwa, Siva is thus addressed by Brahma: “I know that Thou, O Lord, art the eternal Brahm, that seed which, being received in the womb of thy Sakti (aptitude to conceive), produced this universe; that thou united with thy Sakti dost create the universe from thine own substance like the web from the spider.” In the same creed Siva is the personification of the sun (which he is equally with Surya) or fire, the genial heat which pervades, generates and vivifies all; and Bhavani, who, as the goddess of nature is also the earth, is the universal mother.

Among the Assyrians, the supreme god, Bel, was styled the “procreator”; and his wife, the goddess Mylitta, represented the productive principle of nature, and received the title of the queen of fertility. Another deity, the god Vul, the god of the atmosphere, is styled the beneficent chief, the giver of abundance, the lord of fecundity. On Assyrian cylinders he is represented as a phallic deity. With him is associated a goddess Shala, whose ordinary title is “Sarrat,” queen, the feminine of the word “Sar,” which means chief. Sir Henry Rawlinson remarks, with regard to the Assyrian San, or Shamas, the sun-god, that

the idea of the motive influence of the sun-god in all human affairs arose from the manifest agency of the material sun in stimulating the functions of nature. In Phoenician mythology, Ouranos (heaven) weds Ghe (the earth), and by her becomes father of Oceanus, Hyperon, Iapetus, Cronos, and other gods. In conformity with the religious ideas of the Greeks and Romans, Virgil describes the products of the earth as the result of the conjugal act between Jupiter (the sky) and Juno (the earth). According to St. Augustin, the sexual organ of man was consecrated in the temple of Liber, that of woman in the sanctuaries of Libera; these two divinities were named father and mother.

In the month of April, when the fertilizing powers of nature begin to operate and its productive powers to be visibly developed, a festival in honor of Venus took—place at Rome; in it the phallus was carried in a cart, and led in procession by the Roman ladies to the temple of Venus outside the Colline gate, and then presented by them to the sexual parts of the goddess. This is only symbolizing the same idea as expressed by Virgil in the Georgics. We find similar ideas in the religious creeds of America, and of the remote islands of the Pacific Ocean. According to the Indians of Central America, Famagostad and Zipaltonal, the first male and the second female, created heaven, earth, man, and all things.

The Tahitians imagined that everything which exists in the universe proceeds from the union of two beings: one of them was named Taroataihetounou; the other Tepapa: they were supposed to produce continually and by connection the days and months. Those islanders supposed that the sun and moon, which are gods, had begotten the stars, and that the eclipses were the time of their copulation.

A New Zealand myth says we have two primeval ancestors, a father and a mother. They are rangi and papa, heaven and earth. The earth, out of which all things are produced, is our mother; the protecting and overruling heaven is our father.

It is thus evident that the doctrine of the reciprocal principles of nature, or nature active and passive, male and female, was recognized in nearly all the primitive religious systems of the old as well as of the new world, and in none more clearly than in those of Central America—thus proving, not only the wide extent of the doctrine, but also its separate and independent origin, springing from those innate principles which are common to human nature in all climes and races. Hence the almost universal reverence paid to the images of the sexual parts, as they were regarded as symbols and types of the generative and productive principles in nature, and of those gods and goddesses who were the representatives of the same principles. The Phallus and the Cteis, the Lingam and the Yoni—the special parts contributing to generation and production, becoming thus symbols of those active and passive causes, could not but become objects of reverence and worship. The union of the two symbolized the creative energy of all nature; for almost all primitive religion consisted in the reverence and worship paid to nature and its operations.

Evidence that this worship extensively prevailed will be found in many countries, both in ancient and modern times. It occurs in ancient Egypt, in India, in Syria, in Babylon, among the Assyrians, in Persia, Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany, Scandinavia, and among the Gauls. In Egypt, the phallus is frequently represented as the symbol of generation. According to Ptolemy, the phallus was the object of religious worship among the Assyrians and also among the Persians. In Syria, Baal-Peor was represented with a phallus in his mouth, according to St. Jerome. The Jews did not escape this worship; and we see their women manufacturing phalli of gold and of silver, as we find in Ezekiel xvi. 17.[1] Among the Hindoos a religious reverence was paid to the Lingam and Yoni, and among the Greeks and Romans to the Phallus and Cteis. Among the Teutons and Scandinavians, the god Fricco, corresponding to the Priapus of the Romans, was adored under the form of a phallus; a similar god under a similar symbol was adored in Spain, whose name was Hortanes.

This worship has been found in different parts of America, in Mexico, in Peru, at Hayti; it still prevails at the present day in a great part of India and Thibet. According to Mr. Stephens, the upright pillar in front of the temples of Yucatan is a phallus. We read in an ancient document written by one of the companions of Fernando Cortez: "In certain countries, and particularly at Panuco, they adore the phallus (il membro che portano gli nomini fra le gambe), and it is preserved in the temples." The inhabitants of Tlascala also paid worship to the sexual organs of a man and woman. In Peru, several representations in clay of the phallus are met with. At Hayti, according to Mr. Artaud, phalli have been discovered in different parts of the island, and are believed to be undoubtedly the manufacture of the original inhabitants of the island. In one of the Marianne islands of the Pacific Ocean, on festive occasions, a phallus, highly ornamented, called by the natives Tinas, is carried in procession.

Among the simple and primitive races of men, the act of generation was considered as no more than one of the operations of nature contributing to the reproduction of the species, as in agriculture the sowing of seed for the production of corn, and was consequently looked upon as a solemn duty consecrated to the Deity; as Payne Knight remarks, it was considered as a solemn sacrament in honor of the Creator.

In those early ages, all the operations of nature were consecrated to some divinity, from whom they were supposed to emanate; thus the sowing of seed was presided over by Ceres.

In Egypt, the act of generation was consecrated to Khem; in Assyria, to Vul; in India, to Siva; in Greece, in the primitive pastoral age, to Pan; and in later times, to Priapus; and in Italy, to Mutinus. Among the Mexicans, the god of generation was named Triazoltenti. These gods became the representatives of the generative or fructifying powers in man and nature.

The following curious passage, from Cook's First Voyage, will show that almost similar views were entertained by a primitive race in the islands of the Pacific Ocean, which must have been suggested independently, from their complete disconnection with the ancient world:

"On the 14th I directed that divine service should be performed at the fort: we were desirous that some of the principal Indians should be present, but when the hour came, most of them returned home. Mr. Banks, however, crossed the river, and brought back Tubourai Tamaide and his wife Tomio, hoping that it would give occasion to some inquiries on their part, and some instruction on ours: having seated them, he placed himself between them, and during the whole service, they very attentively observed his behavior, and very exactly imitated it; standing, sitting, or kneeling, as they saw him do; they were conscious that we were employed about somewhat serious and important, as appeared by their calling to the Indians without the fort to be silent; yet when the service was over, neither of them asked any questions, nor would they attend to any attempt that was made to explain what had been done.

"Such were our motives; our Indians thought fit to perform vespers of a different kind. A young man, near six feet high, performed the rites of Venus with a little girl about eleven or twelve years of age, before several of our people and a great number of the natives, without the least sense of being indecent or improper; but, as appeared, in perfect conformity to the custom of the place. Among the spectators were several women of superior rank, particularly Oberea, who may properly be said to have assisted at the ceremony."[2]

The reverence, as well as worship, paid to the phallus in the early ages had nothing in it which partook of indecency: all ideas connected with it were of a reverential and religious kind. When Abraham, as mentioned in Genesis, in asking his servant to take a solemn oath, makes him lay his hand on his parts of generation (in the common version, "under his thigh"[3]), it was that he required as a token of his sincerity his placing his hand on the most revered part of his body; as, at the present day, a man would place his hand on his heart in order to evince his sincerity. Jacob, when dying, makes his son Joseph perform the same act. A similar custom is still retained among the Arabs at the present day. An Arab, in taking a solemn oath, will place his hand on his membrum virile in attestation of his sincerity.[4]

The indecent ideas attached to the phallic symbol were, though it seems a paradox to say so, the result of a more advanced civilization verging towards its decline, as we have evidence at Rome and Pompeii.[5]

We may here introduce an extremely just and opposite remark of Constant in his work on Roman polytheism: "Indecent rites may be practised by a religious people with the greatest purity of heart. But when incredulity has gained a footing among these peoples, these rites become then the cause and pretext of the most revolting corruption." A similar remark has been made by Voltaire. Speaking of the worship of Priapus, he says, "Our ideas of propriety lead us to suppose that a ceremony which appears to us so infamous could only be invented by licentiousness; but it is impossible to believe that depravity of manners would ever have led among any people to the establishment of religious ceremonies. It is probable, on the contrary, that this custom was first introduced in times of simplicity, that the first thought was to honor the deity in the symbol of life which it has given us. Such a ceremony may have excited licentiousness among youths, and have appeared ridiculous to men of education in more refined, more corrupt, and more enlightened times."

Three phases in the representation of the phallus should be distinguished—first, when it was the object of reverence and religious worship; secondly, when it was used as a protecting power against evil influences of various kinds, and as a charm or amulet against envy and the evil eye, as at the postern gate at Alatri and at Pompeii, and as frequently occurs in amulets of porcelain found in Egypt, and of bronze in Italy; thirdly, when it was the result of mere licentiousness and dissolute morals. Another cause also contributed to its reverence and frequent representation—the natural desire of women among all races, barbarous as well as civilized, to be the fruitful mother of children—especially as, among some people, women were esteemed according to the number of children they bore, and as, among the Mohammedans of the present day, it is sinful not to contribute to the population; as a symbol, therefore, of prolificacy, and as the bestower of offspring, the phallus became an object of reverence and especial worship among women. At Pompeii was found a gold ring, with the representation of the phallus on its bezel, supposed to have been worn by a barren woman. To propitiate the deity and to obtain offspring, offerings of this symbol were made in Roman temples by women, and this custom has been retained in modern times at Isernia, near Naples. Stone offerings of phalli are also made at the present day in a Buddhist temple in Peking, and for the same object Mohammedan women kiss with reverence the organ of generation of an idiot or saint. In India this worship has found its most extensive development. There young girls who are anxious for husbands, and married women who are desirous of progeny, are ardent worshippers of Siva; and his symbol, the lingam, is sometimes exhibited in enormous proportions.

In the sixteenth century, St. Foutin in the south of France, St. Ters at Antwerp, and in the last century Saints Cosmo and Damiano at Isernia, near Naples, were worshipped for the same purpose by young girls and barren women.

Sir Gardner Wilkinson records similar superstitious practices at the present day at Ekhmim in Egypt. The superstitions of the natives here ascribed the same properties to a stone in one of the sheikh's tombs, and likewise to that of the temple of Pan, which the statues of the god of generation, the patron deity of Panopolis (Ekhmim), were formerly believed to have possessed; and the modern women of Ekhmim, with similar hopes and equal credulity, offer their vows to these relics for a numerous progeny.

We may conclude with the following passage from Captain Burton, which exhibits similar customs among a rude and barbarous people of the present day: "Among all barbarians whose primal want is progeny, we observe a greater or less development of the phallic worship. In Dahome it is uncomfortably prominent. Every street from Whydah to the capital is adorned with the symbol, and the old ones are not removed. The Dahoman Priapus is a clay figure, of any size between a giant and the pigmy, crouched upon the ground, as if contemplating its own attributes. The head is sometimes a wooden block rudely carved, more often dried mud, and the eyes and teeth are supplied by cowries. The tree of life is anointed with palm-oil, which drips into a pot or a shard placed below it, and the would-be mother of children prays that the great god Legba will make her fertile."

FOOTNOTES

[1]"Thou didst take also thy fair jewels of my gold, and didst make to thyself images of men, and didst commit fornication with them."—Noyes's Translation of Ezekiel.

[2]Hawkesworth's *Voyages*, vol. i. ch. 12.

[3]The thigh had a peculiar sanctity. It was the part burned of the sacrificial victim as of a sweet savor to the Deity. Bacchus, it will be remembered, was preserved in embryo at the thigh of Jupiter; and Pythagoras, in his initiations, displayed a golden thigh as the last mystery.

[4]*Memoires sur l'Egypte*, partie deuxieme, p. 196.

[5]*Secret Museum of Naples; Being an account of the Erotic Paintings, Bronzes, and Statues contained in that famous "Cabinet Secret."* By Colonel Fanin. Now first translated from the French. With sixty illustrations. 4to, London, 1871.